

Below Human: On Porosity and Pervasion

Zairong Xiang

The pandemic of the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 has so far infected every corner of the world. Rewinding the clock to late January 2020, the sudden outbreak of the virus in the Chinese city of Wuhan elicited at best some suspicion if not outright racist reaction in the public in the West. For the first time I experienced direct racist attacks on the streets of Berlin. Fellow Chinese citizens and others of East Asian backgrounds have reported similar experiences of racism ranging from verbal to physical attacks in Germany, France, the UK and across the world. The pandemic further unveils the thin civility of a world built on a socio-economically and onto-epistemologically unjust structure. This structure permeates not only vernacular racism on the street but also epistemological racism that regards every 'other' as both infectious and irrelevant.

As a response to the French philosopher Alain Badiou's reflections on the pandemic (then epidemic) that is unfortunately imbedded in the racist stereotype of the 'dirty Chinese', and on the theoretical Eurocentrism that invokes Cartesian philosophy to solve the problem, I wrote a text, 'On the Epistemic Condition', in which I argue that

If we are to understand Covid-19 as arising from a complex, planetary entangled, deep ecological crisis caused and exacerbated by colonial capitalism, Cartesian Reason lies at its very epistemic center: not only as the philosophical groundwork for colonialism

¹ Xiang Zairong, 'COVID-19: on the epistemic condition', 6 April 2020, openDemocracy, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiUjY_zq8nrAhXkdN8KHZdGDmsQFjABegQIBBAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.opendemocracy.net%2Fen%2Fcan-europe-make-it%2F-covid-19-epistemic-condition%2F&usg=AOvVaw3jKLSkwwwja98ZctM--yqk (accessed 30.7.2020).

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

and capitalism, but also as embodied in the very understanding of Cartesian man whose metonymy insists on the West as impenetrable, impenetrable not only to any virus of "the Other" (the Chinese virus, the Wuhan flu) but also to ideas [...] This false idea of impenetrability and Eurocentric arrogance have squandered the time the Euro-American "Other" bought for them.¹

In this article I would like to focus specifically on the idea of impenetrability as it re-emerges starkly at the wake of the pandemic as both a bodily and epistemic imago of the modern/colonial subject, aka nation-state, by going back (and forth) in time, interweaving theories of body as they are articulated in the medical classics of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and philosophical cosmology.

We will take our starting point from a crucial aspect of the human body as it is conceived in TCM's medical theory, specifically in the *Huang Di Nei Jing* or the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon: the bodily orifices or the body as orifice. We will examine the 'reverse anthropocentrism' of this body-of-orifices as the connector between heaven and earth, and as a porous entity that is both a part and a reflection of the cosmos. Then we will see how this model of the body tells us about the world's maintenance and flourishing.

In the medical classic *Huang Di Nei Jing* (*Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*), the founding text of traditional Chinese medicine dated to the warring states (475–221 BCE), Qibo, the erudite doctor with whom Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor, is in conversation, theorizes the human body mainly through a series of connections. Here the human body is known through its nine orifices, which are said to connect with its five inner depots (五臟) where precious energies are stored and contained. The conversation is recorded in chapter four, 金匱真言, or the 'True Words from the Golden Closet', of the book 黃帝內經—素問 (*Su Wen or Simple Questions of the Inner Canon*). Doctor Qibo answers the Yellow Emperor Huang Di's question, which reads as follows: '五臟應四時，各有收益乎' (The five depots correspond to the four seasons. Do all of them have [something specific] that they collect and receive?).² Qibo's explanation revolves around the correspondences among the cardinal directions, chromatic notes, the five depots and the nine bodily orifices. Schematically, we could summarize the connectivity and correspondence between the five inner depots (五臟) and the nine bodily orifices (竅) in this way:

East – Green/Blue – **Liver** – **Eyes**
South – Red – **Heart** – **Ears**
Centre – Yellow – **Spleen** – **Mouth**
West – White – **Lung** – **Nostrils**
North – Black – **Kidney** – **Two Yin [Sites]**

Let us focus on the inner-outer connectivity between the depots and the orifices, which could be illustrated using the hexagram Tai of the

Yi Jing or *Book of Changes* (we will go back to this point later). If we follow the convention in Chinese and take the philtrum as the centre of the body, which is in fact called just that, 人中 in Chinese, literally the middle point of the human (body), we could divide the five groups into the upper body – eyes, ears and nostrils – and lower body – mouth and the two yin sites.

³ *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen: An Annotated Translation of Huang Di's Inner Classic – Basic Questions*, trans. Paul U. Unschuld, Hermann Tessenow and Jinsheng Zheng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 93.

In this text I will elucidate several interesting points of this 'body-of-orifices', as I call it: first and foremost, it is easy to notice that in this model the body's porosity is heavily emphasized. In fact the human body is only conceived through its external openings, the nine *qiao*-orifices. We will look at this more closely in the lower body, especially the 'two yin sites', before we reflect on what hexagram Tai might be able to tell us about the human body and the social body.

1. Body of Orifices

Take the cardinal point north as an example. Qibo elaborates the 'seasonal collection and reception' of the north in chapter four of the *Simple Questions of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* as

北方黑色，入通於腎，開竅於二陰，藏精於腎，故病在谿。

Historian of traditional Chinese medicine Paul Unschuld translates the paragraph as:

The North; black color.
Having entered it communicates with the kidneys.
It opens an orifice in the two yin [sites].
It stores essence in the kidneys.
Hence the disease [it brings forth] is in the ravines.³

The connection between the inner depots and the outer orifices, in this case between the 'kidney function' and the two yin [sites], is articulated with a concept that is central to the porous body: *kai qiao* 開竅. Literally this concept means 'open – *kai*, orifice(s) – *qiao*.' Here, as in English, *kai* or open could be both a verb (transitive), to open, and an adjective (intransitive), that the orifice is unblocked, opened, '*kaiqiao*-ed'. Connection is therefore imaged primarily through permeability, pervasion and porosity rather than a joining together of separated or separable entities.

Qiao is the word for orifice, a polyvalent and polysemic word (說文解字). The 2nd-century dictionary that explains the composition and 'etymologies' of Chinese characters explains *qiao* in the following manner: '空也，從穴敖聲' (*Qiao*, that is, emptiness, connotes a cave and bears the sound of *jiao*). It is primarily used to designate bodily orifices – the visible ones: the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, genitals and anus; as well as the invisible ones closely related to acupoints – using the word 穴 *xue*, which also means a cave, as in the quoted text.

⁴ James Miller, *China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 87.

⁵ Volker Scheid, 'Promoting Free Flow in the Networks: Reimagining the Body in Early Modern Suzhou', in *History of Science* 56(2) (2018), pp. 131–167, p. 139.

⁶ See Miller 2017 (footnote 3), p. 96.

The porous body of connecting orifices is a key, or more precisely a hole, to an understanding of 'the fundamental relationship between cosmic vitality and sexual vitality'.⁴ The hole lies at the centre of the concept of 'pervasion' or 通. Closely related to *kaiqiao*, *tong* 通, 'read in a transitive manner', connotes 'the "openness" and, by extension, "unblocking" of the conduits and networks; [...] read intransitively, unhindered physiological process and activity of any kind'⁵ in TCM. It further points to an understanding of nature and the cosmos in a interpenetrating framework that is not preoccupied with the boundaries between the human and non-human worlds, that is, between/among the ten thousand things that are inert or alive, boundaries that we have become accustomed to consider as self-evident, ahistorical and cross-cultural.

One figure stands out quite prominently: the cave or grotto. In the etymological explication of *qiao*, the word *xue* 穴 is used, which designates another, albeit less tangible orifice: the acupoints. The other common word that is much more frequently used in both philosophical and religious Daoism is *dong* 洞 (cave). The very nature that is emphasized here of the cave 'dong' is its unblockedness or *tong* 通. The largely homophonous Chinese language often establishes connections through puns based either on homophones or neighbouring sounds or characters that share in one way or other similarities that point to mystical dimensions of the pervasive connectivity of the ten thousand things. That is to say, linguistic porosity is also epistemological. It is not a coincidence but forms part of the wider connections and correlations that have been established through the long philosophical, mystic and medical traditions (these seemingly straight-forward disciplinary separations are of course also easily permeated). The resonance between the grotto (*dong* 洞) and permeability/pervasion (*tong* 通) is therefore not only a pun based on phonetic resonance; it also emerges from a cosmology of holes (*kong* 孔) and emptiness (*kong* 空).

The body-of-orifices, the mountain and the heaven-and-earth all share the same 'locative emptiness [which] is what brings together these three dimensions of the cosmos in profound relationship.'⁶ But emptiness (*kong*) is never quite empty. It hollows out ontological essentialism yet fills with cosmic multiplicity – it is the pli, the baroque fold that unfolds and enfolds into a dizzying, multiplying cosmos of the ten thousand things. Chapter 42 of the Daoist classic *Daodejing* goes: '道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物' (Dao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, three generates the ten thousand things). These profound connections are further elucidated by the very hexagram (Tai) that describes the cosmic 'great harmony', often invoked to 'represent' the body-of-orifices in philosophical and medicinal treatises.

2. Two Yin Sites

Take again the cardinal north as an example: the north and black colour ‘開竅於二陰’ (opens an orifice in the two yin [sites]), according to the *Simple Questions*. Unschuld’s translation needs slightly adjusting: the north opens *orifices* instead of ‘an orifice’ at the two yin sites. What does ‘two yin [sites]’ refer to? What are the two yin sites (二陰)?

In *Shanju Xinyu* (山居新語) Yuan Yangyu interprets the two yin sites or ‘而陰’ as ‘二便’, that is, two genitals:

人中者，以自此而上，眼、耳、鼻皆雙竅，自此而下，口暨二便皆單竅，成一《泰》卦也

What *renzhong* (the ‘philtrum’) marks is this: from here above, the eyes, ears, and nostrils are all double orifices; from here below, the mouth and the two outlets are all singular orifices, this forms therefore a hexagram Tai.⁷

It is easy to mistake the two yin or two orifices/outlets for the male and female genitals, after all in vernacular Chinese they are respectively called the yin stem (陰莖, penis) and the yin passage (陰道, vagina). However, in this case the anus would be left unmentioned. In fact, as Unschuld clarifies in a footnote, the ‘two yin [sites]’ refer to ‘the outlets for urine and stool’.⁸ In other words, ‘the two yin sites’ or ‘outlets’ (二便 or 二陰) points to the genitals and the anus, as two yin openings that belong to the lower body, one in the front (前陰) and one at the back (后陰). That is to say, the ‘two’ here are not the ‘two’ biological sexes, represented by the penis and the vagina, but the anus and the genitals in general. This is not a one-sex model either. Thomas Laqueur’s influential history of the Western body in Greek antiquity traces a one-sex model in which the male body is taken as the model against which the female body is seen as a ‘less developed’ and therefore imperfect version.⁹ The body-of-orifices in TCM, however, is not modelled on any individual sexuation; instead, it is indifferent to (sexual) differences, at least with this very ‘representation’ that categorizes the genitals as one of the ‘two yin [sites]’.

I have argued elsewhere that the body ‘at this moment of visual abstraction [...] is neither sexed nor gendered’.¹⁰ The penis is considered to be the same ‘yin orifice’, undifferentiated from the female genitals – although here Qibo might not have looked closely and miscalculated the number of orifices. Anatomically speaking, the penis does contain a hollow space. Considering the urethra, the penis is an orifice (*qiao*竅).

This reading is reductive and limited to the bare minimum of one textual statement without situating it in the broader philosophical and then socio-historical contexts. As any medical theory and praxis, TCM has its own history of changes in tandem with societal changes. For example, TCM has developed a gendered medicine, that of *fuke*

⁷ Quoted in Zhongshu Qian, 管錐編 (*Limited Views*) (Beijing: Sanlian Shidian Press, 2007), vol. I, p. 25.

⁸ See Unschuld, Tessenow and Zheng 2011 (footnote 2), p. 97.

⁹ See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Zairong Xiang, ‘Transdualism: Towards a Materio-Discursive Embodiment’, in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5(3) (2018), pp. 421–438, p. 433.

¹¹ Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Léon Vandermeersch, *Les Deux Raisons de La Pensée Chinoise: Divination et Idéographie* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2013), p. 139.

¹⁵ See Unschuld, Tessenow and Zheng 2011 (footnote 2), p. 93.

(婦科), whose cousin in modern biomedicine would be that of gynecology. While it is beyond this paper's purpose and scope to deal with this particular history,¹¹ it is nonetheless important to stress that despite its promising model of the sex/gender-indeterminate body-of-orifices, throughout China's changing history equally normative and sometimes no less repressive practices against women abound. In the Song dynasty in particular, when *fuke* emerged as a fully fledged discipline within TCM, medical theories 'appeared more concerned with female difference than either earlier or later in Chinese history', though, according to Charlotte Furth, as a response to the anxiety of the imperium to provide benevolent rule 'under the aegis of a society that was revising its inherited models of kinship and family'.¹² However, the so-called female difference in medical thought here is preoccupied first and foremost with the aspect of 'maternal and child health'¹³ rather than a biological essence per se. With this anti-romanticization note in mind, we could nonetheless tell a different story of the body-of-orifices against its historic contingency.

3. Hexagram Tai and the Cosmic Order

Taking the cardinal north in *Simple Questions* as an example again, we notice that the human body is open to/with(in) the larger world of the universe. Sinologist Léon Vandermeersch terms this 'anthropomorphisme occidental à l'inverse',¹⁴ which maps nature onto the body. Let us look at the correlation once more:

北方黑色，入通於腎，開竅於二陰，藏精於腎，故病在谿。

The North; black color.

Having entered it communicates with the kidneys.

It opens an orifice in the two yin [sites].

It stores essence in the kidneys.

Hence the disease [it brings forth] is in the ravines.

The word 'ravines', a geological feature of nature, a natural landscape, is here referred to as follows:

The large meeting points of flesh are the valleys; the small meeting points of flesh are the ravines. It is in the parting of the flesh where the ravines and valley meeting points are located. [...] Furthermore, the ravines or '谿谷' are the location in the flesh where water flows and stagnates. Hence in case of diseases affecting the spleen, these 'ravines' are influenced and edemas develop.¹⁵

The connectivity therefore exists not only between the surface porosity of the body and the inner five depots but also with the wider world. A salient example of this porous connectivity is reading hexagram Tai as a model of the body as explained by Yuan Yangyu, quoted above. The nine orifices separated by the philtrum form the hexagram, but how exactly does this work? To better understand this

intricate model, we need to take one step back and review the working of yin and yang, the two fundamental energies and propensities of the universe with which the *Yi Jing* is constructed. They are represented by two types of lines, the yin open lines and the yang continuous lines. Their connotations need to be situated in the cosmological and philosophical contexts within which the *Book of Changes* and the *Inner Canon* emerged.

Etymologically, yin means the northern, shadowy side of the mountain and yang the southern, sunny side. If we take the northern hemisphere as the standpoint, the boundary between the northern side and the southern side of the mountain also depends on the movement of the sun. Since the sun's movement changes according to an unchangeable route, the differences/boundaries between yin and yang are at once clear and difficult to demarcate. Yinyang in this sense embodies a principle of the unchangeability of (non-)changing. 'Yin and yang is/are either different and the same'.¹⁶ More philosophical evidence for yinyang's sameness/difference abounds: 繫辭 or the *Commentary on the Appended Phrases*, an important Confucian commentary on the *Yi Jing*, relates yinyang to the Dao: '一陰一陽之謂道' (One yin and one yang, this is called Dao),¹⁷ and right after the generative numerology of the ten thousand things mentioned above, *Daodejing* chapter 42 states: '萬物負陰而抱陽' (The ten thousand things carry yin yet embrace yang), and this is because '此兩者，同出而異名' (these two, they come from the same place yet bear different names) (*Daodejing*, chapter 1).¹⁸

Let us return now to hexagram Tai: the *Book of Changes* contains sixty-four hexagrams composed of free combinations of the yin and yang lines that form different types of trigrams, whose coupling further forms the hexagrams. Hexagram Tai in particular describes the cosmic and societal status of the 'Great Stability' which is a result of an ideal status of dynamic balance. To convey the ideal of a dynamic stability, Tai has an all-yin upper trigram (*kun* 坤), which has the propensity to descend, and an all-yang lower trigram (*qian* 乾), which ascends. Tai forms an image of the intermingling of the two fundamental cosmic energies. Furthermore, *kun*, the all-yin trigram that in relation to *qian* denotes the earth, is situated above *qian*, the all-yang trigram that in relation to *kun* denotes heaven. The accompanying 'Commentary on the Judgments' reads: '天地交而萬物通，上下交而其志同' (Heaven and earth interact perfectly, and the ten thousand things communicate [*tong* 通] without obstacle. Those above and those below interact perfectly and their wills become one [*tong* 同]).

Divided/joined by the philtrum, the body is elucidated in hexagram Tai as follows: the upper, terrestrial sphere contains the three pairs of orifices (eyes, ears and nostrils) represented by three yin/open lines, while the lower, celestial sphere contains three single orifices (mouth, genital and anus) represented by three yang/continuous lines. In order to connect and intermingle, trigrams are placed on the opposite

¹⁶ See Xiang 2018, p. 436.

¹⁷ Bi Wang, 周易注 (附周易略例) (*Annotated Changes of Zhou*), ed. Yulie Lou (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2011), p. 345.

¹⁸ See Robin R. Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ See Nikita Cai-Ying Choi, 'What Happens after the Contactless Art World?' n-d, *WCSCD Curatorial Inquiries*, <https://www.wcscd.com/onlinejournal/what-happens-after-the-contactless-art-world%3F> (accessed 30.7.2020).

²⁰ Not dissimilar to Judith Butler's notion of the 'shared vulnerability' in her *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). Butler further argues that 'it is precisely because I am from the start implicated in the lives of the other that the "I" is already social, and must begin its reflection and action from the presumption of a constitutive sociality', in Judith Butler, Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Malden: Polity, 2013), p. 107.

²¹ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 22.

of their usual tendencies: the conventionally feminized descending *kun*-earth is situated above the masculinised ascending *qian*-heaven. The nine orifices that we've seen in the previous two sections are here organized into a 'reversed' cosmic order with which 'those above' and 'those below' could interact and integrate their wills.

In the *Yi Jing* hexagram Tai is followed by its exact opposite, hexagram Pi, where the 'cosmic order' is observed: *qian* yang above *kun* yin, heaven above earth. Yet surprisingly, Pi means stagnation, when communication and connection are blocked (not *tong* 不通). This is simply because, as the all-yang *qian*-heaven now situated 'in his proper place' continues to ascend and the all-yin *kun*-earth continues to descend, these two fundamental cosmic energies no longer touch each other; they depart further and further away. The great stagnation is formed.

Coda: Writing from Pandemic Confinement

Internet memes of artists and curators doing exhibitions with a world collapsing behind or around them abound.¹⁹ Similar images with 'PhD defending their dissertation' against an erupting volcano or sinking Titanic have also been widely shared. Finishing this essay amidst the seemingly never-ending nightmare of the pandemic, largely in self-isolation, urges me to reflect on the implications, for better or worse, of the bodily porosity that this essay tries to delineate with the help of the *Inner Canon* and the *Yi Jing*.

If bodily porosity makes the concept of 'other' untenable – let us call it 'our shared porosity'²⁰ – what does it mean to rethink bodily and therefore social porosity in a moment which renders bare the very unjust system of production, domination, exploitation and also representation of the globalized world. This frequently travelled world could be, in the language of the *Yi Jing*, one greatly communicated/ing and unblocked (*tong* 通) and therefore hexagram Tai. But for whom and to whose detriment?

Within this porous world no one is essentially incompatible with others – the other as occupying the space of exteriority has essentially no place. This shared porosity that connects the inner 'depots' with the outer orifices opens up to an understanding of the world as premised upon fragile and vulnerable interdependency. It demands a decolonial reconfiguration of knowledge, of the idea of knowledge as mastery and appropriation, of the concept of human itself, towards an immanent ecology of radical entanglement. 'It is this *nonseparability of difference* that renders injustice intolerable.'²¹

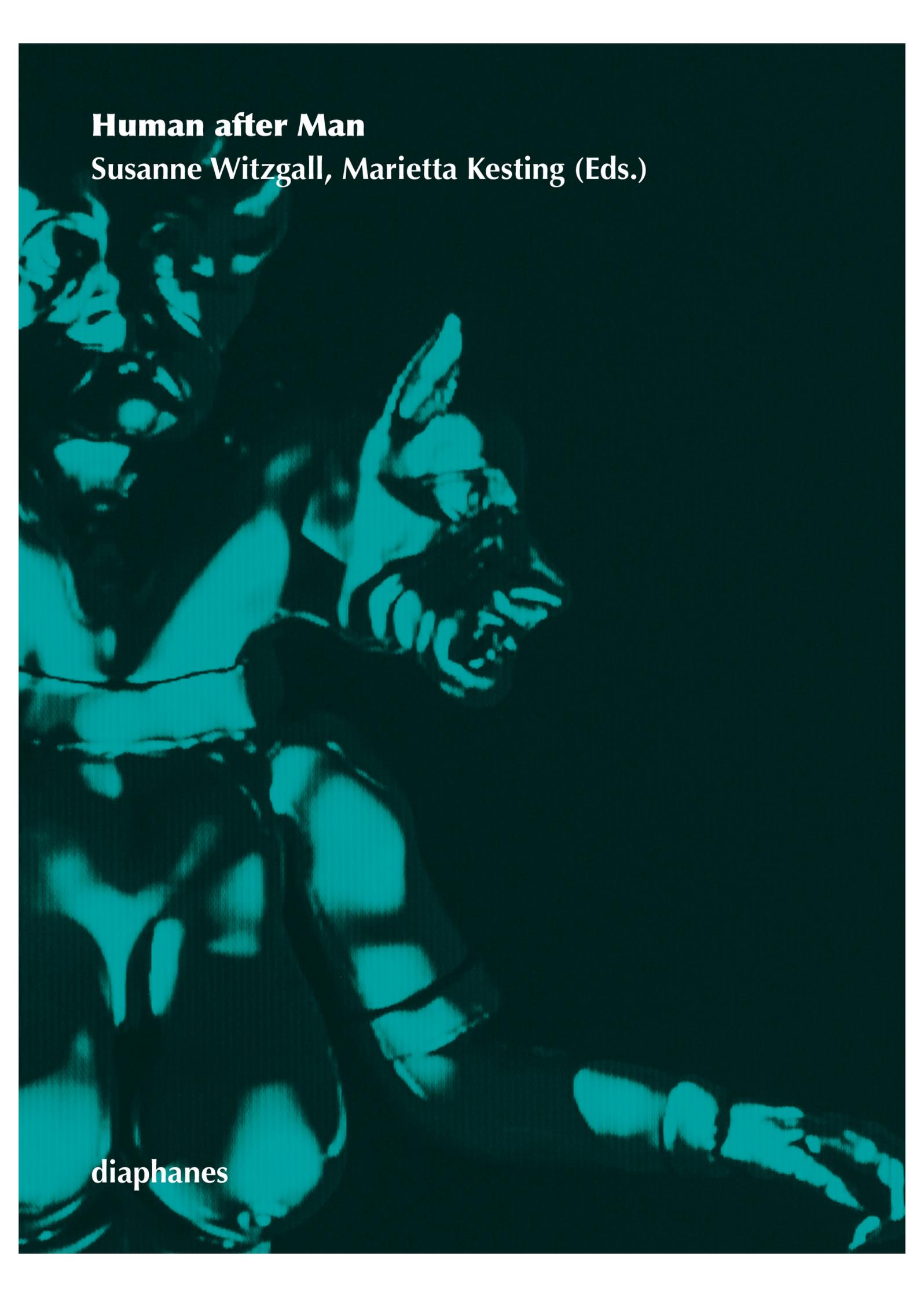
Yet shared porosity also means shared contagion. The moment we are living in could be said to have moved to the form of Pi or the great stagnation, with restricted (air) travel and movements in general. I have been writing this essay largely in confinement as it has been

either imposed or recommended by medical and political authorities in different parts of the world. 序卦傳 *Xu Gua Zhuan*, or the commentary that describes the unfolding reasoning of the sixty-four hexagrams, explains the transition from Tai to Pi, that is, from great stability to great stagnation as follows: ‘《泰》者，通也。物不可以終通，故受之以《否》’ (Hexagram Tai denotes unblocked communication and unhinged perversions. Nothing can be or should be thoroughly unblocked (*tong* 通) forever, therefore hexagram Pi is given/has emerged). Once entering in hexagram Pi, the great stagnation is no longer simply reactive to a world that ‘cannot/should not be thoroughly unblocked forever’: ‘大往小來，則是天地不交，而萬物不通也’ (Greatness has departed and there comes pettiness; heaven and earth do not meet each other and therefore there is no communication among the ten thousand things).

These scenarios of un/blockedness always mean very different things to different communities. Globalization enabled by colonization and global capitalism, for example has been largely beneficial to some and greatly detrimental to others. This is particularly true of indigenous communities, to the extent that it brought genocide to a large part of the Amerindian populations. The latter would not agree with the assessment of the globalized world as one that resembles the hexagram Tai or the ‘Great Stability’.

The flattening narrative of the ‘democratic virus’ – meaning that the coronavirus infects everyone equally – a very popular thesis in the early days of the pandemic (then epidemic) – was quickly proved wrong. The pandemic has not been democratic; it has disproportionately affected the already socio-economically marginalized groups, who are often at the same time also the essential forces (or ‘cornerstones’) that keep societies largely in lock-down running. They are at the exploited margin/corner/‘lower end’ of the globalized world that has enabled the world’s flourishing.²² Exploitation is not only physical but also symbolic. If we were to follow the *Yi Jing*, in order to work out and maintain a ‘great stability’ of the flourishing of all, the ‘lower end’ (of the hexagram, and metonymically the globalized world) should be positioned above, dignified as the essential forces. As Tai, that which guarantees the ‘flourishing of the ten thousand things’ is explicated in the accompanying ‘Commentary on the Judgments’: ‘天地交而萬物通也，上下交而其志同也’ (Heaven and earth interact perfectly, and the myriad things communicate without obstacle. Those above and those below interact perfectly, and their will becomes one).

²² For a discussion on the concept of ‘low-end globalization’ see: Gordon Mathews, Lin Linessa D., Yang Yang, *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017); for a critique, see my essay ‘Shanzhai: A Theory of the South?’ (2020): <https://timesmuseum.org/en/journal/south-of-the-south/shanzhai-a-theory-of-the-south> (accessed 30.7.2020).



Human after Man

Susanne Witzgall, Marietta Kesting (Eds.)

diaphanes